Enhancing Training Advantage for Remote Learners
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For some time Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders have been readily participating in VET certificate programs, above rates for non-Indigenous Australians (albeit at lower levels of attainment than non-Indigenous Australians). Relatively high participation rates are not however translating into higher levels of employment. Successive Closing The Gap reports point to a widening gap in employment participation, particularly in remote areas. This suggests that the role of VET certificate courses in improving employability of participants is problematic. Compounding the problem of transition to employment is the problem of attrition. In remote parts of Australia, attrition rates for VET courses are very high, for example Certificate I courses have attrition rates of more than 90 per cent. It would appear that on the whole, participants are not getting what is needed from their courses and they are dropping out as a result. However, this is not the case for all courses.

To address these concerns a research project titled ‘Enhancing Training Advantage for Remote Learners’ funded by NCVER, is examining what makes programs more successful. The project, auspiced by Ninti One Limited with research partners from around Australia, will be conducting five case studies on successful programs in a variety of remote Australian contexts to determine what factors make them work well to achieve better retention and employability for participants.

This paper and presentation will report on initial findings of the five case studies. It will also present an analysis of quantitative data from VOCSTATS and the five programs to illustrate the kinds of achievements that are possible in an efficient, and effective VET program for remote learners. Some formative implications from the findings will also be discussed.

Introduction
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have for some time embraced vocational education and training (VET) particularly in places classified as remote and very remote by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Participation rates are high and qualification holders are increasing on the back of strong participation. However, the expectations of VET as a vehicle for transition to employment or higher education have not been realised, again particularly in remote parts of Australia. One reason for this is attrition rates of about 90 per cent for many courses, particularly at low AQF levels.
To better understand the dynamics of these somewhat disturbing realities, a consortium of researchers across Australia is investigating adult learning programs that they felt were effective in achieving above average levels of retention and high levels of employability. The purpose of this paper is to present early findings from the research, funded by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research. At the time of writing some data is yet to come in, but there is enough to make some initial observations and unpack some of the implications that emerge from these findings.

Context
The context for the study is shown in the map below (Figure 1). Five sites were selected by the researchers, based on their pre-existing involvement in these areas. In the West Kimberley, the Nulungu Research Institute is investigating a case involving ranger training in one community, south of Broome. In the Northern Territory, Batchelor Institute is examining one of its own courses, a health worker training program. James Cook University is examining the case of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander training college in Cairns that caters for learners from Cape York, with a focus on community service and mental health. University of New England, is investigating the Literacy for Life Foundation’s ‘Yes I Can’ campaign in Western New South Wales. TAFE, South Australia, is examining a health worker training program for Anangu trainees the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands of northern South Australia. The project is auspiced through Ninti One Limited, which is particularly focused on remote parts of Australia. With the exception of the Yes I Can case study, all the programs are accredited vocational education and training programs.

Our concern in this paper is focused on the adult learning needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who live in places defined as ‘remote’ or ‘very remote’ by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2011). When we discuss issues for remote learners in this paper, we are specifically referring to this group.

Definitional considerations
Our brief in the research was to consider employability and retention within predominantly (though not exclusively) VET programs. We consider each of these terms from a definitional perspective.

Employability
‘Employability’ is defined variously in the literature. It is not only a matter of whether an individual is job ready or not. Some research points to aspects of employability in terms of the individual as opposed to the factors that surround the individual. That is, employability can be considered as a property of the individual or a property of the environment in which an individual exists (McQuaid &
Lindsay, 2005). Others see employability as multidimensional with capital components, career management components and contextual components (Williams et al., 2015). While the contextual and career management components are acknowledged in this study, the focus on training as a vehicle for employability means that the focus here is more on the capitals that individuals bring to or build up on a ‘pathway’ towards employment. These components, according to Williams et al., are human, social, cultural and psychological. The latter could also be termed ‘identity capital’ (Côté & Schwartz, 2002). There are links between each of these capitals, even though much of the emphasis for training (as we discuss later), has been on the development of human capital. For the purpose of this study, we define individual employability as the propensity for employment, where that propensity is influenced by a combination of factors, including assets that individuals hold, along with a range of organisational, and broader societal contributors. This is largely consistent with a glossary definition of ‘employability skills’: ‘The skills which enable people to gain, keep and progress in employment, including skills in the clusters of work readiness and work habits, interpersonal skills and learning, thinking and adaptability skills’ (Naidu, 2013).

Retention and completion
At one level, retention and completion are relatively self-explanatory. Retention can be described as the proportion of a course or program that is completed. ‘Completion’ is then simply satisfactory achievement of the full program of intended study. Technically, there are complications in the measurement of retention and completion (see explanatory notes in National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2015) which means that the data presented later in this review (Statistical summary, page Error! Bookmark not defined.) are not directly comparable with other data collected directly for the purpose of measuring retention and completions. The use of the word ‘attrition’ in this paper is deliberate. Completion rates are not the problem we are examining. The real problem is attrition or dropout rates. If we assume that completion of a course increases participants’ chances of being employable (and we acknowledge that this may be contested) then the reasons for attrition are what we need to focus on. Or conversely, if we find courses where attrition rates are much lower than the average, then we can focus on what is different about these programs and learn from them.

VET, adult learning and adult literacy
‘Vocational Education and Training’ is recognised within tertiary education as a discrete sector. It attracts public and private funding, and is scoped within the context of the Australian Qualifications Framework (Australian Qualifications Framework Council, 2011) generally up to Level 5 of a 10 level scale. Adult and Community Education, while fitting outside the AQF system, in many cases overlaps and complements VET training by providing a mix of work and personal development skills and knowledge. Also outside of the formal VET sector is the Australian Core Skills Framework (Hutchison, 2013), under which a lot of adult literacy and numeracy programs fit. The current Australian Government strategy for delivering programs that provide ‘core’ or ‘foundational’ skills is called Skills for Education and Employment (SEE) (Department of Industry Innovation Climate Change Science Research and Tertiary Education, 2013). The intent of the bulk of government funded programs is to increase employability and productivity consistent with assumptions embedded in Human Capital Theory, discussed in the next section. The problem with the embedded assumptions of human capital theory is that they present as a given the notion of pathways and careers as logical and reasonable. CRC-REP work has questioned the validity of these assumptions (Guenther & McRae-Williams, 2014, 2015; McRae-Williams & Guenther, 2012, 2014).
Literature review

The literature that follows focuses on three areas of relevance to the research. First we consider the theoretical underpinnings of Human Capital Theory and its implication for remote adult learning. Next we canvas some of the more recent literature on the topic of remote participation in vocational education and training. Finally we critically examine the role of VET as a vehicle for transition to employment in remote Australia.

Human Capital Theory

The need for improved English literacy and numeracy skills is perhaps obviated by a number of statistical indicators that point to apparent educational disadvantage among many remote Indigenous learners. These indicators which include school-based literacy and numeracy results, PISA scores, school retention rates, transition to higher level VET qualifications and higher education courses would all seemingly point in the one direction (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2013; Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2011; Thomson et al., 2011). They suggest, based perhaps on dominant theories of human capital and economic development (Spring, 2011) that the pathway to economic prosperity lies in a progressive upskilling of people so they can engage in the economy, free from the constraints of poverty (Becker, 1993).

Among other things, Human Capital Theory attempts to explain why individuals invest in education and training. In short, the rationale for investing in skills and knowledge acquisition is the economic benefit that accrues from the stocks of knowledge and skills that are gained (Becker, 1993). Human capital can be described in terms of the stocks of skills and knowledge possessed by individuals. There is a large body of research that does suggest that by and large, the logic of HCT is largely correct: those with higher skill levels tend to be more employable (Fredman, 2014; Independent Economics, 2013) and earn more money (Blöndal & Field, 2002; Fredman, 2014), though there are some exceptions to this general rule (Karmel & Fieger, 2012). The benefits to the broader economy of increased human capital is also well supported in the research literature. Internationally, economies with higher levels of human capital, tend to be more productive and wealthier (Hanushek et al., 2013; OECD, 2001). They have lower rates of crime and perform better on a range of health and wellbeing indicators (Feinstein, 2002; Feinstein et al., 2008).

There are of course other motivations for individuals to engage in learning, such as the personal identity benefit that arises from the identity and social benefits that come from adult learning, many of which have already been documented by NCVER’s previous research (Miller, 2005) as well as in its regular series of student outcomes surveys.

Given the many good reasons why training is so beneficial, one obvious question is ‘why are attrition rates so high?’ Guenther and McRae Williams have suggested that the lack of connection between training and employment outcomes in remote communities is the disconnect between the priorities of work and the priorities of culture (Guenther & McRae-Williams, 2014; McRae-Williams & Guenther, 2014). That is, the ontologies, epistemologies and axiologies of mainstream work are not strongly connected to those of local culture.

And yet the argument among many influential commentators is that the problem is that training is not connected to so called ‘real jobs’ (Abbott, 2015; Colvin, 2013; Forrest, 2014; Mundine, 2014; Scullion, 2014a, 2014b). The skills for ‘real jobs’ rhetoric is not supported by evidence. Analysis conducted by the CRC-REP shows that about one-third of the workforce has no qualifications and no more than year 10 school attainment (Guenther, 2013). Some have tried to suggest that the failure
of training to transition people from training to employment is because of the siloed nature of service delivery, the lack of collaboration between service providers and the general lack of support available to remote communities. But again, research conducted by the CRC-REP does not support this view either. Guenther and McRae-Williams (2015) pointed out that in examples of intentional collaboration between service providers, attrition rates are as high as 100%, even where the focus is on building foundational skills directly required for employability.

Remote participation in VET among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders

While this study takes no position as to the worth of Human Capital Theory assumptions, as a preface to a discussion about adult learning in remote communities, it is important to note these underpinnings. We do not take these as a given and recent research conducted through the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation (CRC-REP) bears out some concerns about the causal pathways from education to training and economic participation. The assumption that getting a Certificate III will lead to a ‘real job’ is flawed. (Guenther & McRae-Williams, 2014; McRae-Williams & Guenther, 2014).

This is not to suggest that learning English and being numerate are not important for remote adult learners. There are countless studies and commentaries that show how important learning English and numeracy (and pre-vocational learning more generally) in remote contexts is (Australian National Training Authority Research Advisory Council, 1998; Guenther, 2006; Guenther, Castle, et al., 2010; Guenther et al., 2011; Guenther, Gurruwiwi, et al., 2010; Kral, 2012; Kral & Falk, 2004; Nakata, 2012; Osborne & Guenther, 2013; Young et al., 2007). The common thread with all these studies is that learning English and being numerate is important not only for getting a job. That is of course one reason, but it is perhaps lower on the list of priorities than human capital theory would have us believe. Among the key benefits of adult learning in remote contexts are:

• Its value in helping learners understand and succeed in ‘two worlds’ (Guenther et al., 2011; Guenther, Davis, et al., 2010; Guenther, Gurruwiwi, et al., 2010);
• Its worth for engaging in textual activities for family, religious and community reasons (Kral, 2012; Kral & Falk, 2004);
• Its role in shaping identities and building confidence (Guenther, 2011; Kral, 2010; Kral & Schwab, 2012; Miller, 2005; Wallace, 2008);
• Its ability to help learners network and build social capital (Sushames et al., 2011; Wallace, 2011); and
• Its contribution to capacity building for communities and individuals (Kral & Falk, 2004; Sushames, 2006).

None of the above should deny the importance of adult learning approaches (and particularly those focusing on literacy and numeracy) that support learners transition into some form of economic participation. These will be discussed in the next section.

VET as a vehicle for transition to employment

Work related outcomes are indeed important for many remote Indigenous learners and there have been many programs documented in the literature that are designed to support transition to employment with varying degrees of success. The idea that improved literacy and numeracy should be a vehicle for learners to transition into employment is not new. There are several studies over the last 10 years or more that have focused on how best to transition low literacy learners into employment (see for example Guenther, Castle, et al., 2010; Guenther et al., 2008; Guenther, Gurruwiwi, et al., 2010; Wallace & Appo, 2011; Young et al., 2007).
The important question though is what works in the transition from training to employment, particularly in the face of ongoing calls for training that leads to ‘real jobs’ and the avoidance of training for training’s sake (Abbott, 2013; Colvin, 2013; Cullen, 2013; Tudge, 2011). While it may be tempting to jump on the same bandwagon it may be important to recognise that there has been a slow and steady increase in the uptake of employment in remote Australia by Indigenous people over the last decades. With each census there are fewer Indigenous people not going to school, not achieving training qualifications and not gaining employment (Guenther & Boyle, 2013). On the issue of the availability of real jobs in remote communities recent analysis conducted by the CRC for Remote Economic Participation shows that in very remote Australia, there are more than enough low-skilled jobs to go around for every unemployed Indigenous person (Guenther & McRae-Williams, 2014) and that not having a Certificate III, which is increasingly promoted as the entry standard for employment (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency, 2013), should not be a barrier (Guenther & McRae-Williams, 2016; McRae-Williams & Guenther, 2014; McRae-Williams et al., 2016) in itself to economic participation. What is surprising is the disconnect between the rhetoric of ‘real jobs’ and some aspects of policy, such as the Developing Northern Australia agenda (Australian Government, 2015), which largely ignores any support for human capacity development of those who belong to the North (McRae-Williams & Guenther, 2016).

Further, analysis of Census data compared with school-level data available through the My School website, presented by Guenther et al. (2014) shows a strong link between a community’s history of economic engagement, English as the language spoken at home, education and training and current educational performance at school. Table 1 summarises some of the findings. While this table says nothing directly about adult literacy and numeracy it can be used to argue a case for approaches that work on building community capacity rather than simply focusing on a single intervention (such as training programs connected to real jobs). Put simply, the environment in which an intervention such as SEE operates in a remote community, is highly complex and complicated. What this then means is that the logic for an intervention like SEE, which presumes to act causally to enable clients ‘to participate more effectively in training or in the labour force’ (Department of Industry Innovation Climate Change Science Research and Tertiary Education, 2013, p. 2) may not have the desired impact unless the necessary supports are put in place outside of training and job-seeker support. That is, a range of family support, legal, housing, health and social supports may be required. A SEE-RCP collaborative partnership may be insufficient to facilitate this kind of support unless the partnership can broker the required relationships to ensure all supports are in place.
Table 1. Analysis of community indicators and corresponding school performance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community indicators for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders only (2011 Census)</th>
<th>Top performing schools*</th>
<th>All very remote schools with &gt;80% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders</th>
<th>Remote School Attendance Strategy (RSAS) Schools**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Labour force participation</td>
<td>51.10%</td>
<td>42.80%</td>
<td>35.60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment rate</td>
<td>6.30%</td>
<td>7.60%</td>
<td>7.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous language spoken at home</td>
<td>48.90%</td>
<td>58.90%</td>
<td>70.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent with income &lt;$300/week</td>
<td>44.60%</td>
<td>53.40%</td>
<td>61.10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per cent completed Yr 12</td>
<td>27.60%</td>
<td>15.90%</td>
<td>10.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per cent completed up to Yr 8, or didn’t attend</td>
<td>18.00%</td>
<td>25.40%</td>
<td>29.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per cent with Certificate qualifications</td>
<td>47.40%</td>
<td>41.50%</td>
<td>36.10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: [ABS, 2012; ACARA, 2014] * Top performing schools are those very remote schools with >80% Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander student populations, based on achievement in Years 3, 5 and 7 reading and numeracy NAPLAN scores. ** RSAS schools are those Round 1 schools identified as low attendance schools (Scullion, 2013).

Methodology

The ‘enhancing training advantage’ research is built on mixed methods approaches where qualitative data informs quantitative analysis obtained from individual case study sites and regional data obtained from local sources where they are available (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). The qualitative data draws from unique ‘case study’ sites (Yin, 2003) and while we anticipated some common findings, the learnings are not anticipated to be generalizable to all training environments across remote Australia (Falk & Guenther, 2007). We anticipate however, that the learnings may inform an understanding of why current approaches do not achieve desirable completion, retention and employability outcomes for remote learners, and how aspects of training policy, practice and administration might be improved to achieve better outcomes.

The lead researchers for this project are mindful of their status as outsiders within the remote contexts they are examining (Guenther et al., 2015). By and large though, this mitigated through the pre-existing relationships between the researcher and communities. It was also mitigated through the use of an Advisory Group that included Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives, many of who were from the regions that the case studies were carried out in. In the Kimberley case, local researchers with family connections to the site were employed.

Research questions

Two research questions (RQs) are driving this research. We refer to ‘employability’ in these questions, rather than ‘employment’ partly because the issue of destinations beyond training is beyond the scope of what is required in Topic 2, and is also difficult to track from the view of training providers, even though they may well be linked to job service providers. We recognise that outcomes other than employment may be important for participants (Fredman, 2014; Miller, 2005).
At a national level though, the need for VET (Pocock et al., 2011) and even foundational literacy and numeracy skills (Shomos, 2010) to increase productivity is paramount. While recognising the multiple reasons for engagement in training, our research questions explicitly make the connection between training and employability.

**RQ1:** How can retention and completion in post-school training be improved (to improve employability) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders living in remote communities?

**RQ2:** What indicators of success other than completion, would be important for training in remote communities (to improve employability)?

**Ethical considerations**
This project obtained ethical clearance through ethics committees at each of the universities represented in the project.

**Findings**
The findings presented in this paper are based on an early cross-case analysis of the data that was available at the time of writing. There is still some data to come in. Therefore, after final analysis we anticipate there will be additional detail.

**Quantitative analysis**
One of our first tasks was to interrogate existing datasets to find out what they had to say about retention rates across the regions of the case study sites. Table 1 shows analysis of Total VET Activity data for the regions associated with the case study sites. The data is drawn from the NCVER’s VOCSTATS online tool. We separated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander activity from non-Indigenous training, and used enrolment and completion tables to present the data shown for each of the case study regions. The last row of the table shows a comparison with the national figures.

Attrition rates vary considerably within regions, from as low as 50 per cent at Croydon-Etheridge to 100 per cent in the APY Lands. Note though that the numbers are very low for both these regions and should be treated with some caution. Between states represented, attrition rates range from as low as 74 per cent in Queensland up to 100 per cent in South Australia, overall the attrition rates for all regions is 81 per cent. This compares to a national figure of 77 per cent.
Table 2. Enrolments by region and AQF level, with completions and overall attrition rates (indigenous students only) Source: VOCSTATS Total VET Activity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Student SA2</th>
<th>Diploma or higher</th>
<th>Certificate IV</th>
<th>Certificate III</th>
<th>Certificate II</th>
<th>Certificate I</th>
<th>Total enrolments</th>
<th>Completions</th>
<th>Attrition to completion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>Bourke - Brewarrina</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>209</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>451</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>86.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>Far West</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>81.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NT</td>
<td>Alligator</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>60.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NT</td>
<td>Anindilyakwa</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>92.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NT</td>
<td>Daly</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>58.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NT</td>
<td>East Arnhem</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>253</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>511</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>80.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NT</td>
<td>Elsey</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>78.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NT</td>
<td>Gulf</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>234</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>89.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NT</td>
<td>Thamarrurr</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>92.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NT</td>
<td>Tiwi Islands</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>256</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>85.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NT</td>
<td>Victoria River</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>92.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QLD</td>
<td>Aurukun</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>71.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QLD</td>
<td>Cape York</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>425</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>77.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QLD</td>
<td>Croydon - Etheridge</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QLD</td>
<td>Kowanyama - Pormpuraaw</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>86.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QLD</td>
<td>Northern Peninsula</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>242</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>73.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QLD</td>
<td>Tablelands</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QLD</td>
<td>Torres</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>237</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>695</td>
<td>209</td>
<td>69.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QLD</td>
<td>Torres Strait Islands</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>390</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>73.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QLD</td>
<td>Weipa</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>81.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QLD</td>
<td>West Arnhem</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>69.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SA</td>
<td>APY Lands</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WA</td>
<td>Roebuck</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WA</td>
<td>Derby - West Kimberley</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>383</td>
<td>822</td>
<td>437</td>
<td>1747</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>89.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>Total enrolments</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>462</td>
<td>1882</td>
<td>2508</td>
<td>1500</td>
<td>6570</td>
<td>1248</td>
<td>81.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total completions</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>397</td>
<td>439</td>
<td>1248</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Regional attrition rate</td>
<td>76.6%</td>
<td>81.2%</td>
<td>85.4%</td>
<td>84.2%</td>
<td>70.7%</td>
<td>81.0%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>National attrition rate</td>
<td>85.8%</td>
<td>71.3%</td>
<td>71.0%</td>
<td>76.5%</td>
<td>84.3%</td>
<td>76.7%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Early findings from case studies

Table 2 shows actual completion rates for the programs investigated as part of this study. Note that the point of this table is not to try to compare relative effectiveness of each case study site. Rather, it is to simply show the actual completion rates and the variety of scope across the case study sites. What the data show is that of those with data provided, the retention outcomes of only two are above the regional averages as shown in Table 1.

Table 3. Case study sites (enrolments to completions)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case study site</th>
<th>Focus areas</th>
<th>Estimated completion rate for selected program(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NSW Yes I Can</td>
<td>Adult literacy campaign (non-accredited)</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QLD Cairns Aboriginal Training College</td>
<td>Cert III Addictions Management and Community Development (AMCD); Cert IV Indigenous Mental Health (Suicide Prevention)</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SA TAFE APY Lands aged care</td>
<td>Cert II/III Community Services, Aged Care, Home and Community Care</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WA Ranger training program</td>
<td>Cert II Conservation and Land Management</td>
<td>Data not available yet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NT Batchelor Health Worker training program</td>
<td>Cert IV Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Primary Health Care</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While this comes as something of a surprise, given the perception that all the case study sites were far superior than the national or regional benchmarks, the qualitative data can still be used to answer the two research questions shown earlier (see page 7).

What follows arises from a cross case analysis of much of the qualitative data that is available from all sites. The intention here is not to provide intimate details about each case study, but rather to identify and describe common factors across all sites.

How can retention and completion in post-school training be improved?

While we asked particularly about retention and completion in programs, in many cases respondents defaulted to responses about ‘participation’. And while we were looking for ways to improve retention and completion, respondents often described barriers to participation. Again, with a caveat that the data here is incomplete, we offer a selection of factors that respondents described most frequently. The factors we discuss are covered under headings of family, personal and cultural matters; employment outcomes; trainer factors; training coordination and support; and community and family support.

Issues categorised as family, personal and cultural matters, were more likely to be inhibitors to completion. Respondents discussed how personal circumstances, cultural obligations, health issues or competing family priorities caused people to drop out. Note though that none of the data comes from people how had dropped out.

Employment outcomes were reported as a strong motivator for participation. That is respondents either wanted to get a job, improve their employment promotion prospects or gain salary increases. Many of the trainee respondents reported that they were already employed.
Trainer factors were discussed in terms of trainer qualities and characteristics of delivery that helped learners stay on track. They described the importance of positive relationships with students. Partly connected to this, was the importance of longevity—some respondents did not like trainer churn. Good trainers were recognised for their support of trainees—they were respected by learners. Trainers who were adaptable and flexible were also recognised.

Positive training coordination and support was a factor that helped trainees remain in courses despite their personal and family circumstances. In part this was about communication flow to and from trainers to trainees, but it also included administrative support with paper work, organising transport and sitting and listening to the needs of students. Some respondents talked about trainers being advocates for them, for example helping them with letters of support in order to get a job.

Community and family support was a factor that in most cases was helpful to trainees’ progression towards completion, but the lack of family support conversely was seen to be an inhibitor. Many trainees talked about family members who had shown the way through previous training and employment. Others talked about elders actively encouraging participants to stay in the course.

A number of other factors contributed to retention. They included the resilience and sense of purpose of individuals, trainers having high expectations of their trainees, and having supportive peer relationships and networks. A variety of models were offered as being supportive: block release models, catch up blocks or days, and the availability of mentors among others.

What indicators of success other than completion, would be important for training in remote communities (to improve employability)?

According to our respondents a number of alternative indicators point to success in addition to completion and employability. That said, employability and employment outcomes were certainly a priority for many if not most respondents. One for the most often cited indicators of success was in relation to confidence and identity. Trainees described being proud of their achievements. Trainers saw the transformational impact of training. One trainer described a course having a healing effect. The significance of foundation skills was also frequently cited. This included basic literacy and numeracy skills, but it was also about work readiness and employability skills. An important indicator of success for some respondents was the level of local community ownership there was for a course. Often this was connected to aspects of culture and local knowledge. That is, where the learning was mediated by local trainers, in language or ‘on country’, training was viewed as being more valuable and ultimately successful. Funding security was another common theme that resonated with stakeholders across all sites. Conversely, where funding for courses was inadequate or uncertain, the likely effects were seen as negative. Longer term, an indicator of success, particularly of low level training, was the extent to which the training assisted trainees transition to higher certificate levels or university.

Emerging implications

Noting that the findings presented here are based on incomplete analysis of data, there are still some implications that we can draw from this study so far. At one level the findings concur with previous studies cited earlier in the Literature Review that have been conducted on remote training for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners (for example Australian National Training Authority Research Advisory Council, 1998; Miller, 2005; Young et al., 2007). However, a critical examination of the findings reveals a number of points that have not been previously brought out.

The first point to note is that success is defined by the successful. The bulk of the data we have here is built on those who are currently participating or have completed a VET qualification. In practice it
is very difficult to find participants who have dropped out. But then again, given that they have ‘failed’ they may not be the best to talk with about success, because they have not experienced it. Regardless, what is apparent is that most of our respondents had bought into the assumptions of human capital theory supported by VET and employment service delivery systems as noted earlier in the literature.

A second point to note is the power of perception. Our programs were all perceived to be successful in terms of retention, but the data when compared to the region and the nation (see Table 1), for two of the case studies, shows that they were not. Perceptions then can mask reality, and the consequence is that providers can either be blind to the reality or they can make excuses, reinterpreting the data to suit a more favourable retention figure. For example, some providers offered data that showed retention on the basis of units rather than courses. Others might be tempted to show completions on the basis of actual commencements rather than enrolments. Another factor used to explain low retention was that students who dropped out often returned later on. But ultimately if this is the case it should still be reflected positively in the data. It is not. Nevertheless, these perceptions of success are underpinned by passionate people who believe strongly in what they are doing.

A third point relates to funding. Funding for the courses in case studies was mostly based on delivery or enrolments, not on course completion, so it then does not matter if students drop out as long the total hours of delivery adds up. Current funding models may actually encourage attrition for this reason. Some of the research highlighted in the literature review points to a disconnect between the purposes of employment programs, literacy and numeracy training and VET programs (see for example Guenther & McRae-Williams, 2015; Guenther & McRae-Williams, 2016; McRae-Williams et al., 2016) The ‘Yes I Can’ (not accredited) approach costs about three times as much per participant than training funded through the VET system. However, while the numbers are small, the retention rates of 78 per cent, mean that the cost per completion is a lot lower than for programs that offer less than 26 per cent completion rates, which is the majority of VET programs.

A fourth point to note relates to our identified alternative measures of success. The importance of alternative measures of success have been highlighted for some time now, as noted in the literature review. However, if retention and employability are only part of the product of effective training programs, how do we take account of changes in confidence, local ownership or cultural engagement? It could be that some of these indicators are used as criteria for funding. For example, funders could mandate that providers have a community engagement process in place before training commences. A prerequisite for remote programs could be employment of local liaison staff to work with trainers to facilitate local involvement and elder support.

Conclusions

The problem that the research presented in this paper was designed to address was the relatively low completion rates of remote adult learning programs tend to achieve. Nationally, attrition rates for certificate courses is about 77 per cent. In the regions investigated here the attrition rates are on average about 81 per cent. The case study sites included a mix of different accredited and non-accredited programs. While not necessarily representative of all adult learning programs in remote Australia, sites were selected on the basis that they were thought to be effective in achieving above average completion rates.
The course data for the sites shows a mixed picture. Two courses reported outcomes well above the regional and national averages, and two courses reported outcomes consistent with regional and national averages for completions.

The synthesis of the case study findings brings together the main and often common findings from the sites in response to two research questions:

**RQ1:** How can retention and completion in post-school training be improved (to improve employability) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders living in remote communities?

**RQ2:** What indicators of success other than completion, would be important for training in remote communities (to improve employability)?

In response to the first question, the early analysis of qualitative data from all sites (although as yet incomplete) suggests several ways that retention and completion can be improved. In this analysis, we are assuming that employability and retention are directly linked, but in the final analysis we will examine the data more closely to check this assumption. Our initial findings suggest five frequently cited factors that contribute (positively or negatively) to retention. A range of family, personal and cultural matters were identified by respondents that influence the likely completion of a course. These factors were generally inhibitors and included financial and family pressures, alcohol and drugs and crime. It may be reasonable therefore to deduce that the absence of these inhibitors will improve outcomes. Employment outcomes were also linked to improved retention. Training that is connected to existing work—or even volunteering—was seen as improving the chances of completion. Trainer factors also made a difference. Trainers who formed good relationships with students, who were respected by learners and who used engaging delivery strategies were often mentioned. The quality of training coordination and support was also reported to make a difference. This was partly about smoothing administrative processes and also about improving communication flows. Community and family supports were also considered critical for successful completion. Where trainees were supported by families, where elders were directly involved in teaching, and where there were family role models to serve as examples to follow, completion was considered to be more likely. There were a number of other factors, and these will be examined more closely in subsequent analysis.

Completion was not the only indicator of success identified across the case study sites. Among these were the building of confidence and identity among trainees. The importance of developing foundation skills in literacy, numeracy and communication was also considered a positive outcome. Having local community ownership of a course or program was thought to be a significant outcome in its own right. The incorporation of local culture and local knowledge was also seen as a significant outcome. Beyond these, funding security was stressed as a fundamental indicator of success.

In many ways, these findings are not surprising. To a large extent they are supported by previous studies that report similar findings which we note in the Literature Review. However, our critical examination of the findings points to a number of implications. Firstly, success is defined by the successful. This means that those who drop out are often forgotten. Secondly, we note the power of perception. Two programs that were touted as highly successful (in achieving completions) were in fact no better than the average. The passion and enthusiasm of many respondents for their courses was evident. Where retention outcomes were not achieved, some of these passionate respondents offered a “but” in defence of their program. Thirdly, current funding models may actually work against improved retention outcomes, particularly where payment is based on hours of delivery. Finally, we found a number of indicators other than completion that point to success. The question

Comment [JG1]: To be updated once we have data in from Kimberley
though here, is how these indicators are taken into account, either from a reporting perspective or from a funding accountability perspective.

References


